

PS 3525
.E63 K5
1922
Copy 1



KNUT AT ROESKILDE

PHILIP MERIVALE





Class PS 3525

Book E.63K5

Copyright N^o 1922

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.



KNUT AT ROESKILDE

A TRAGEDY

THE CONTEMPORARY SERIES

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

- LAODICE AND DANAE *Play in One Act*
By *Gordon Bottomley*
- IMAGES—OLD AND NEW *Poems*
By *Richard Aldington*
- FIVE MEN AND POMPEY *Dramatic Portraits*
By *Stephen Vincent Benét*
- COMMON MEN AND WOMEN *Rhythmus*
By *Harold Gammans* [Out of print]
- HORIZONS *Poems*
By *Robert Alden Sanborn*
- THE MARSH MAIDEN *And Other Plays*
By *Felix Gould*
- OMAR AND THE RABBI *Play in One Act*
By *Frederick LéRoy Sargent*
- THE TRAGEDY *Play in One Act*
By *Gilbert Moyle* [Out of print]
- THE SMILE OF MONA LISA *Play in One Act*
By *Jacinto Benavente*
- THE LAMP OF HEAVEN *Play in One Act*
By *Mrs. L. Worthington Smith*
- THE DEATH OF TITIAN *A Dramatic Fragment*
By *Hugo von Hofmannsthal*
- THE WIND OVER THE WATER *Play in One Act*
By *Philip Merivale*
- THE ENGLISH TONGUE *Poems*
By *Lewis Worthington Smith* [Out of print]

KNUT AT ROESKILDE

A TRAGEDY

BY
PHILIP MERIVALE



BOSTON
THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY
1922

Copyright, 1922, by
THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY

All rights are expressly reserved. For rights of public performance, address the publishers, who are the author's agents.

PS3525
.E63K5
1922

The Four Seas Press
Boston, Mass., U. S. A.

AUG -9 '22

©CLD 61745

TO MY STOUT FRIEND
CHARLES FRANCIS

*"per quem perire non licet meis nugis
quaecumque lusi invenis at puer quondam"*

PERSONS

KING KNUT

JARL ULF

SVEYN

IVAR THE WHITE

GYLLE

ASTRID

SIX WOMEN THAT ATTEND ASTRID

WARRIORS AND HENCHMEN

KNUT AT ROESKILDE

A TRAGEDY

SCENE I.

The hall of JARL ULF's house at Roeskilde. On the right, set high in the wall is a long and narrow window facing south, close under which stands a table on trestles. Further back in the same wall is a doorway leading to the household's quarters, and closed by a heavy curtain, now drawn, of bear-skin. To the right of the back wall is the main door of the house, a heavily barred defence of oak, which is at present open, showing a wide white track, and beyond this, on the further side of a valley, a dense region of black pine forest. Beside the door post is another window, furnished with a heavy shutter, which is also open. On the left of this window is the guest-chamber of the house. The Left wall is taken up by the broad hearth-stone on which a log-fire is now burning. Before this there stands a heavy square-table, at a sufficient distance

to allow room for a man to sit between table and hearth. A wooden stool stands there, and on the right of the table a more magnificent throne of carved oak. Wooden stools also stand by the other table. Among the shadows in the corner beyond the fire stands a harp, whose outline is made mystical, as it grows dusk, by the dancing flame and shadow. It is drawing towards sunset of Michaelmas Eve in the year of grace 1027.

ASTRID is seated on the throne by the table. She is a young woman and beautiful. The daughter of SVEYN FORKBEARD and direct descendant of Gorm of Denmark, she has not yet approved by experience her title to be the mother also of a line of kings, and to divert to the female side the sovereignty of KNUT, which by the early death of his sons Harald and Harda-Knut was to perish from the male. A child's voice from outside startles her.

SVEYN

Mother.

ASTRID

Sveyn—Sveyn! Is it a sail at last?

SVEYN

No. Look! Oh, look!

ASTRID

Come in to me. What is it?

SVEYN

Oh! He is a warrior. He has curled bull's horns
On his helmet, and a spotted head against
His ear.

[ASTRID goes to the door and looks out.]

ASTRID

Who, Sveyn? Why have you left him there?

SVEYN

[*Now partly visible through the window.*]

He comes from Lymfjord in a Danish ship
And he has blood on his sword.

ASTRID

Why do you stand
Half-way between us? He has fought, it may be,
Beside your father. Hasten and bring in
Your father's comrade to his house.

[SVEYN disappears.]

I know

He will have tidings of the battle of kings.

[*She piles wood on the fire. SVEYN enters, a boy of twelve, simply dressed and bare-headed. He leads IVAR THE WHITE by the hand. IVAR is a tall spare man of forty with dark cunning eyes. His hair and long moustache have been bleached by exposure. He wears a cap of steel, furnished with bull's horns, and a leopard-skin hangs from his shoulders, with the head close under his ear. He carries a long bow, with a quiverful of arrows at his back and a sword at his thigh. SVEYN is excited.*]

SVEYN

He is hot from battle, mother. I have seen
Blood on his sword still!

IVAR

Hail, daughter of Sveyn.

ASTRID

You are welcome, stranger. Are you come indeed
From the red field?

IVAR

Before the birds were met
Above the furrow, or the wolves come out,
I left it.

ASTRID

Tell me what you have brought for me,
Stranger.

IVAR

The war is done, blown by one gust
From over the dark water. Victory
Is with my lord the king.

ASTRID

There were three kings
Met in this battle, sir, and one beside
But little less,—

IVAR

The victory is with Knut,
The king of England.

ASTRID

And the Dane with him?
Jarl Ulf that hastened to my brother Knut—!
Ah, tell me if you are hiding by your speech
Some evil that is fallen to our house.

I am no maid to pine for a man's loss,
But wife, and mother of a son, to bear
A dead man's name and honor after him.
Yet—! Stranger, was not Ulf the Dane at sea
Running before this late south-west in time
To join his battle-cry with the three kings?

IVAR

I saw sun-kindled wings of an eagle burn
On the wind, tower up, and stoop: and victory
Was with our king.

ASTRID

What are you hiding? Speak!

IVAR

The golden wings are free and unstricken yet.

ASTRID

Then fall my fears stricken, and my bright hope
Soars up.

IVAR

But angered is the eagle's heart.

ASTRID

He is not hurt!

IVAR

I saw no mark on him.
The raven's wings are closed by Helge stream:
They beak their meat. But wide are the bright wings
Spread out for home, and flapping homeward lead
The Golden Dragon to their nest.

ASTRID

The King!

I am come from Lymfjord over the water straight
To bid prepare a welcome for the king,
Who with your husband sailed for Elsinore
To hold the passage of the Northern Seas,
Thence purposing to come by land.

Your voice
 Strikes with a half-remembered emphasis.
 I have had speech with you, I know not where.

But I remember well, sister of Knut:
In the king's house of England, when I brought
From the king's chamber sentence to your lord
Of banishment.

Ivar of Norway. You
Are Ivar, called the White! This second time
You turn your edge against Olaf, your king.

My king is he that can my will compel
Unto his bidding.

[Getting impatient.]

Mother, he showed me blood
On his sword-edge.

[He goes to the door and looks out.]

The king will be your guest.
The hour I can not tell; but we were thrown

By adverse winds a day out of our course.
Will you not hasten to prepare for him?

ASTRID

We shall be ready.

SVEYN

[*At the door.*]

Mother, a yellow ship
Lies off in the bay, and our own galleys now
Come round the point—a boat is at the wharf.

ASTRID

You said they purposed coming hither afoot?

IVAR

No doubt it is the king's will.

ASTRID

I am glad

Of their approach: and for your news, be you
Welcome.

[*She goes out by the right to the inner rooms.*]

IVAR

Jarl Ulf's ships!

[*To SVEYN.*]

Tell me, had you none
But women and the old men left at home?

SVEYN

[*Coming to him.*]

Who else when Ulf my father sets his sail?

SVEYN

[*As SVEYN makes for the door.*]

Stay, boy! Where now will the cunning sailors sleep,
The fighting men that follow Ulf to war?

Here on the height? Or lower down belike
By the wharf side, and round the edge of the bay?

SVEYN

Oh, by the water side, hard by the ships.
Why do you carry bull's horns on your helmet?

IVAR

First tell me! Now tonight they will draw up
The galleys on the beach?

SVEYN

Yes, yes. Now tell me!

IVAR

Because the strength of the bull is in his horns.

SVEYN

I like the eagle wings my father wears.

IVAR

Oh, Ulf the Dane would fly into the Sun.

SVEYN

[*Seriously.*]

He cannot fly with them.

IVAR

And you have said

A wise thing. Let him learn the truth of you!

SVEYN

Stranger, you do not know him.

[*Turns away.*]

IVAR

[*Holding him.*]

Is it his use

To strike the tackle and bring oar and sail

[14]

Out of the long ships at the close of war?

Tell me.

[The sound of angry voices comes from outside.]

SVEYN

They are at hand. Let go, I say.

IVAR

Answer me, son of Ulf!

SVEYN

I want to go.

IVAR

If you will tell me, you shall wear my sword:

Look! with the blood on it!

SVEYN

Oh! Yes, yes, yes!

We will go down together to the sea

And watch our sailors.

[Figures pass the window.]

IVAR

[Angrily, not perceiving them.]

Tell me now!

SVEYN

[Who has seen them.]

Oh—father!

[IVAR quickly releases him and retires above the hearth: SVEYN runs up to the door on his cry, but falls back as a man strides in, quickly followed by another. The first man is not much above middle height but of commanding habit and great strength. He wears a corselet of leather covered with plates

of gold and from his shoulders sweeps a scarlet mantle bordered with gold: on his head the helmet is of silver bound round with a golden circlet and crested by a golden dragon. His beard and hair are black, with a streak of white, and his eyes are grey and hard. He strides in and stands masterfully by the throne. The other man remains standing in the great doorway, framed against the sunset. His helmet is of silver surmounted by a towering pair of eagle wings. A huge man, he wears thick and heavy rings of copper and gold upon his bare arms, and a grey wolfskin and head hangs from his mighty shoulders. His hair and beard are red and his eyes deep blue. He looks bloody in the red of the sunset.]

THE FIRST MAN

What further would you have of me? The time
Is ripe for beggars when a king must supple
And bow his back for subject-service done.
You were not wont to whine for a sweet word,
Ulf, nor to heap the vaunting of your deeds
On their performance. You are wrong, I say,
To call me thankless.

ULF

Was it I who spake?
Or have my actions need of vaunting now?
Why, in no little matter I have served you
And asked no payment for it, but this only,
That those with me who put across the sound—
To right your folly, king,—should come safe home,
And leave *your* galleys and *your* men to hold
The passage of the straits at Elsinore.
And this I *have* done as I swore to them

The day we launched—upon *your* mission, king.
But at Roeskilde I am host, and here
Are men and ships enough to wait on you.
In this I would not yield, having no more
But your plain will to govern my obedience.
For I am not a dog to run indoors
Without a reason given and no grace shown,
Because a master of slaves has bidden me.
This is not England, king, but on this coast
You hear the speech of Danes.

KNUT

Ay—courteous speech!

Will you put off your fealty at once
And shed subjection with your mail tonight?
Do you ask for service done to be henceforth
Exempt from service, duty, and submission?
Perchance I rate not at your count the cost
Of a few sword-blows and a stroke of the oars.
Have I not thanked you?

ULF

I will no more say
You are thankless, king. I am a thousand times
Paid for the little that you have accepted
Of me.

KNUT

I have undervalued your approach
And sword-play among the ships, you'd say?

ULF

How long

Since I and mine dragged out your ships and you
From Lymfjord creeks?

KNUT

There could have been no end
But this to that day's fighting: for the ships
Of Onund and of Olaf are but skiffs
And wherries to the Golden Dragon's deck.
There was less danger there, belike, than here.

ULF

I would to God then I had left you there
To work your own way out.

KNUT

I know your heart.

ULF

Your pardon, king. I should have held my peace.

[He goes to the door and shouts.]

Draw up the ships above the high-tide mark,
And every man return unto his house.

[SVEYN runs to his father.]

KNUT

[Without turning his head.]

Ivar.

[IVAR attends without answering.]

At nightfall quietly post the crew
Of the Golden Dragon round the house. I have left
Too many ships at Elsinore to sleep
In safety here. Bid Gylle wait on me.

ULF

[Returning.]

For that wherein I offended give me pardon,
And think that in some sort the fault was yours
Who took at my hands such a gift as makes

The noblest blood a beggar to receive,
Without a sign of thanks. I'll say no more.

[IVAR goes out.]

KNUT

You dwell too much on these same services.
Your life is but a tributary, Jarl,
To the main flood of mine—and still the more
For that of old in England I restored you
The life you forfeited by treasons proved.

[GYLLE enters.]

ULF

[Abruptly.]

Be welcome here!

[He takes off his helmet and gives it to SVEYN who sets
it on the table by the window. The sun goes down
behind the pines and it grows grey without: but the
room is ruddy and warm from the fire-blaze.]

KNUT

Gylle, remain.

ULF

Tonight

My son shall be your squire.

[KNUT turns and sees SVEYN.]

KNUT

Come hither, boy.

What is your name?

SVEYN

I am Sveyn, the son of Ulf

Jarl of Roeskilde, king.

[19]

KNUT

You are the heir

Of a good heritage.

SVEYN

Why, I shall be

A captain of the deep-sea galleys, king.

KNUT

You have a stout heart, like your sire.

SVEYN

There's none

Greater nor braver in the North.

KNUT

I think

There is.

SVEYN

I know him not.

KNUT

You have yet to learn.

You are else no squire for me.

ULF

[*Sheltering SVEYN's confusion.*]

The king would say

You should regard himself before all men,

Even your father, as the stoutest heart

That beats in Denmark.

KNUT

Yes, by the eyes of God.

Let this be not forgotten in your house,

Ulf.

ULF

Sveyn shall learn no less than fits a Dane.

KNUT

Out of your mouth, Jarl, and your hasty speech?

ULF

From my heart's utterance and exemplary—
The battles on a hundred beaches, king.
This by his mother's tales of me shall teach
My son right conduct for this life.

KNUT

His mother!

Where is the lady Astrid? Did we not
Send forward messengers to herald us?

ULF

The lady Astrid will be justified.

KNUT

I fear we have taken you in unreadiness
And thereby marred the welcome you would else
Have carefully provided.

[ASTRID *re-enters from the right clothed in white and gold, with a scarlet hood and train sweeping from her shoulders, and a fillet of gold about her head, woven also into her hair. Two women in white dresses bear her train, and four others follow, bearing rushes and flag-flowers. ASTRID moves like a queen, and her obeisance to the king is majestic.*]

ASTRID

Sire, forgive me!

I am not at heart so tardy a hostess, brother,
As the quick minutes show me. And I crave
Your pardon more for *them*, being well assured
You know *my* love and gladness to behold
My brother's face here in my husband's house.

KNUT

Nay, Sveyn's sweet daughter, kneel not to his son.
[*He rises, lifts her affectionately, and kisses her.*]
The fault was ours to come so closely on.
We had meant to march afoot from Elsinore,
But were persuaded by Jarl Ulf to board
And make more swiftly by the water home.

ASTRID

But with more time we had prepared a welcome
More royal, Knut.

KNUT

The welcome I accept,
Becometh royal by the grace in me!
[*He returns to his angry brooding.*]

ASTRID

Will you sup, sire?

KNUT

We have supped upon the ship.

ASTRID

Yet drink for our love's sake.

KNUT

I am not thirsty.

Gylle, pour it!

[ULF *throws his sword violently on the table. It slides from the sheath on to the floor.*]

SVEYN

Oh! Have you broken

The hilt?

[*He runs to pick it up.*]

KNUT

Well—is it broken?

ULF

Sheathe it, Sveyn.

KNUT

I think it lies too loosely in the scabbard.

ULF

None but my folk shall wait upon you here:
Astrid, my wife, shall pour the wine for you
And Sveyn, my son, be your sole cup-bearer.

KNUT

[*Indifferently, seeing IVAR in the doorway.*]

If you will have it so—!

[*ASTRID enters the guest-chamber with SVEYN followed by the women. ULF goes after them.*]

KNUT

[*As IVAR comes to his side.*]

Ulf's men are scattered?

Quick!

[23]

IVAR

As he bade them; and the sailor-folk
Draw up the galleys and dismantle them
Even now, beside the water.

KNUT

And our men?

IVAR

Three-score and ten at nightfall will approach
And hold the road till day-break.

KNUT

Go you down,
Gylle, and bid them have a care tonight
That not a hand be raised nor a foot stir
Till I give order. For I think the Jarl
Is too well wedded with too sweet a wife
To be this first night dangerous.
[GYLLE goes out by the main door and disappears past
the window.]

Yet he is
A mighty warrior in the common mouth
Here.

IVAR

There is many a song in Denmark, king,
Was never heard in England.

KNUT

I will make
New songs for them, to drive the memory
Of the old out of their heads; and of such themes
As shall be over the great waters heard:
And little names shall not be found in them

Of deep sea-thieves and fore-shore-acre-kings.
Well, if he has a stout arm—?

IVAR

And a heart.

I laid no more than treason to his charge.

KNUT

And that was ten years since in England.

IVAR

Here

In Denmark he has nursed his rage ten years.

KNUT

A crown would grace his red hair.

IVAR

Shall I then

Disarm you, king?

KNUT

Think me not feeble grown
Or womanish. I am in that mind still
Wherein you found me, a ready listener
To your suspicion. But I seemed to hear
Relenting in your speech of him, and sought
If in your mind were any trace of change.

IVAR

I am of one mind as of one life, and that
To your sole interest bound.

[JARL ULF *re-enters*: he carries his wolf-skin on his
arm, and throws it down on the trestle-table: he
stretches his limbs, and seems altogether relaxed.]

KNUT

[*Pleasantly.*]

You are weary, brother?

ULF

No more than a good workman that lays down
His scythe at sunset to be ready at dawn
For the day's reaping. With your leave I'll take
Your sword and heavy hauberk from you, king,
And be your squire.

KNUT

Did you not promise me
Your son to do this office? Well. Take this—!
[*He hands him the helmet which ULF sets on the table
beside him, and then proceeds to unfasten his corse-
let. KNUT shakes back his long hair and stretches
himself while ULF is engaged.*]

So for this season we have made an end
Of war. The ships will keep the sound for me,
And Olaf will not launch a galley again
Till the spring comes. I hold our peace secure.
[*ULF has removed the corselet and now begins to un-
fasten his sword.*]
No, leave me that. A little while I'll wear
My sword.

ULF

In peace?

KNUT

A little while I'll wear

My sword.

[*GYLLE enters and comes into the king's line of vision
behind ULF.*]

ULF

Three hundred swords now barely cool
I have in hearing, king. Will you not loose
This blade of yours and sleep secure tonight?
I pray you.

KNUT

[*Having dismissed GYLLE with a glance.*]

Shall I hold myself secure?

You will forgive me, Ulf. I know not yet
How far the seed of discord and rebellion
Have in my absence spread. I have returned
This year to no familiar, ancient home,
But Denmark is a country strange to me,
And all the faces of my countrymen
Hard riddles, and no speaking vows. I scan
And question all, trust none.

[ULF strides in wrath to the door. Nothing can be
seen but the grey road and the deep black of the
forest against the dark sky. ASTRID re-enters with
SVEYN, who carries a cup. The six women, having
strewn the rushes on the floor of the bedchamber,
go out to the right.]

ASTRID

Have a care, Sveyn.

SVEYN

[*In an awed whisper to her.*]

Now shall I bear it to my uncle?

KNUT

[*To GYLLE.*]

And you—

[*Turning to SVEYN.*]

[27]

Yes, nephew, bring it hither—that is done
I bade you, Gylle?

GYLLE

Yes, sire.

KNUT

Well then, Sveyn.

[SVEYN *holds out the cup.*]

Drink of it first.

[KNUT *watches* ASTRID, *whose eyes are untroubled and innocent.* SVEYN *also looks to his mother for instruction.*]

ASTRID

Drink, Sveyn, your uncle bids you.

[SVEYN *drinks.* ULF *swings violently down.*]

ULF

Will you drink now, king?

SVEYN

[*Making a wry face.*]

Oh! How sour it is.

KNUT

It is no dishonorable office, Jarl,

To taste of a king's wine-cup. Let me drink.

[KNUT *drinks.* SVEYN *retreats to his father and mother, who stand together by the trestle-table.*]

ASTRID

Ulf—Ulf, what is amiss?

ULF

The pride of Gorm

That owes by Knut a debt to me this day.

[28]

ASTRID

You are unwounded?

ULF

Oh, all is well with me.

When come you after me to battle, Sveyn?

ASTRID

Not yet for many a year.

SVEYN

Why, by the Spring

I shall be big enough.

ASTRID

You are not old enough,

My babe.

[She caresses him, but he breaks from her.]

SVEYN

I am old enough. I am no babe.

ULF

[Setting him on the table.]

Nay! How he's grown! Come, draw the long sword now!

[SVEYN pulls out the heavy broadsword. KNUT sends IVAR across to them.]

KNUT

Bring the boy hither. Gorm shines out in him.

IVAR

[To ULF.]

The king would speak with your tall pirate. Come!

[29]

SVEYN

[*As IVAR carries him.*]

This blade is longer than that knife of yours!

[*To ASTRID's terror he carries SVEYN, sword in hand, and sets him down before the king, standing over him and excluding the JARL and herself from the group by his back.*]

KNUT

Whose is the sword you bear?

SVEYN

My father's, king.

KNUT

You should not have drawn sword but at my word.
Did you not know that?

[*SVEYN looks up at IVAR who reproves him officiously.*]

IVAR

You must learn respect.

Will you not?

[*SVEYN runs away to ULF.*]

ULF

Why, the lad is but a babe.

KNUT

Let him not play with swords then. If he be
Too young to draw a blade in the king's battle
He is not yet fit to draw for your delight.

ULF

King, will you search in every act of mine
For symbols of disloyalty? I could twist
Out of the noblest utterance blasphemy.
In your own mind the evil—

ASTRID

[*Intervening.*]

Why, it is dark.

I will bid them set the torches up—and Sveyn
Shall go to bed.

[*She takes him out to the inner rooms on the right.*

KNUT *has already plunged into converse with IVAR.*

ULF *pulls the main door to, bolts and bars it, then sits sullenly in the chair by the trestle table, staring moodily at his winged helmet and at a star that shines through the narrow window.*]

KNUT

[*To IVAR.*]

What did she say when first
Your tidings broke upon her?

IVAR

Why, she claimed
And hailed the victory as it were a crown
For one head only.

KNUT

Ay, for that red hair.
But this boy Sveyn has a king's blood in him.

IVAR

She honored Ulf, her husband, with her lips;
But in her heart she crowned him—as I knew
By reading her clear eyes.

KNUT

What, fallen so low!
She—Sigrid's daughter to crown in her heart
Ulf! I will make him now my mountebank.
Go bid the hero sing.

[31]

IVAR

[*Going softly to ULF.*]

Jarl!

ULF

[*Starting and reaching for his sword.*]

Ha! Who is it?

IVAR

What! Is the word so sharp, sir, that you leap
As if I had thrust white steel between your shoulders?

ULF

That thrust had been your last, Ivar of Norway!

IVAR

I had not needed more. The king requires you
To touch the harp. We know your skill with it.

KNUT

[*Seeing ULF hesitate.*]

We have remembered your old cunning, Ulf,
When in the English winter you would wile
A twilight hour with Northern songs away.

[*Two men enter from the right with torches, which
they set in sconces, and go out.*]

ULF

I am your servant in this house.

[*He takes the harp from the shadows and seats himself before the king.*]

KNUT

What song

Most pleased me then?

[32]

ULF

[*Touching the strings.*]

I'll sing you a new song, king.

How Edane out of Ireland turned the heart
Of Gudbrand by submission from his lust
To pity and love.

IVAR

He sailed with Tryggveson!

KNUT

I never heard the queen was subject to him!

[*ULF strikes the chords. GYLLE is huddled asleep by
the fire: IVAR stands motionless behind KNUT. ULF
sings.*]

Under the pine-branches from dawn to the dusk of day,
By the waters of Kaare Edane the fair queen lay,
Edane of the Red Wreath that crowned her temples pale,
Whom Gudbrand Thordson brought out of Innisfail.
On the Autumn winds he brought her, that blow from the
island green,
To be a slave in Kaare, Edane that was a queen.
But alone all day in the pinewood she lay out, watching
the sea,
And the red sails and the white sails and the gannet
sloping free.

KNUT

I'll hear no more of captives brought along
In the wake of Olaf Tryggveson, tonight.
Was it but yesterday or a hundred years
Since we threw down his heir in Lymfjord bays?

ULF

[*Still playing.*]

The deeds of mighty men may yet make songs
In the mouth of a brave enemy. Hear now!

[33]

Now in the islands
Westward of England,
On a Good Friday,
Thus it befell
Olaf the Norseman,
Bright son of Tryggve.
Bright were the broadswords
Circling in sunlight;
On the wet sea-beach
Bright were the dripping prows,
Bright the long oars.

[He pauses, then crashes out.]

By God I would now
I had been there.

[KNUT starts up, and strides to the door of the guest-chamber. ULF is rapt in his music and goes on dreamily. KNUT leans on the curtain of his door and listens as if compelled against his will. IVAR also is fiercely moved by the music.]

ULF

Stay! I will sing of frightened eyes and soft
Ministering hands of women unto men
After long viking turned again toward home.
These have the brine in their bleached yellow hair,
Their eyes are stung with the bitter wind and spray
And sore with gazing over the desolate deep.
And some have been much wounded, and the blood
Is dry upon their mail: and they are sick
For home. So now they shall have rest awhile:
Until the year change and the season come
Betwixt the sowing and the reaping months

Or after harvest till the ploughing-dawns,
When the wind shall call them out and the waves carry
 them

And to their quickening ears the song of the pine
Shall echo in the curved sea-beaten planks.

And then the hearts of men grow weary again

For the troubled waters and the spaces wide:

Their sleep is broken and the arms of women

Hold them at home no longer.

[At the beginning of this speech, which he utters in a monotonous chant, ASTRID re-enters, standing motionless, watching him as the others are watching, in silence: but at this point she folds her arms about his head and clasps it to her breast.]

ASTRID

Ulf! But you

Shall go not for the calling of the winds

Or sounding of the waters.

ULF

I have that,

Sweet wife, here planted in the Danish earth

Shall keep me at home, a careful husbandman.

KNUT

Will you not, sister, since by his own word

We have lost Jarl Ulf your husband, trust to me

Your son to breed in England?

ASTRID

There's one soil only
Sire, for a Dane to grow on.

KNUT

I'll not press you
Further.

ASTRID

If you would sleep now, brother, all
Is ready.

KNUT

I am not ready yet for sleep.
My mind is vigilant. Are you yet awake,
Ulf?

ULF

Do mine eyes look heavy?

KNUT

Bring the chess
And play with me.

ASTRID

What, brother, will you play
So late—and you so weary both?

ULF

Bring hither
The board.

*[She takes the harp to its place and brings the board
and chessmen from the same place.]*

KNUT

What stake set you in this, Jarl Ulf?

ULF

I'll play for no stake with a guest of mine.
'Tis not my custom.

[*He seats himself with his back to the fire.*]

KNUT

If you doubt your skill

Play for good faith.

ULF

[*Setting out the pieces.*]

That cannot be redeemed,
Being lost. Though I were certain of my skill
I should not set mine honour on my wits.

KNUT

You are wise to keep them separate, so you save
One part of manhood if the other's lost.

ULF

Bid Sveyn be up betimes to go to church,
Astrid, with me. Good-night.

KNUT

Sister of mine,
Will you not see this match?

ASTRID

Alas! my lord,
I know no move of it.

KNUT

Watch me and learn.

ASTRID

I could not master it in an evening.

KNUT

No?

Good-night. I should do wrong to rob you of sleep.

ASTRID

Sire, may I go?

KNUT

[More kindly; going to her.]

Daughter of Sveyn, good-night.

Forget not you the bond that joins us still,

Though the sea part us and new interest

Appear to sever. Go now, and good rest.

[ASTRID goes out. KNUT returns to his seat smiling.]

How went the games of old we played in England?

I beat you mostly, if I remember.

ULF

Yes.

The White to me.

[He opens: they play quickly at first.]

KNUT

[Tossing aside a pawn.]

So, I have drawn first blood.

ULF

[Taking one of his.]

And so; we are equal, king.

KNUT

[Taking another.]

By no means, Jarl.

[They play on more intently: neither has much advantage but the king becomes morose as he finds he cannot win easily, his face with every piece taken]

from ULF lighting up fiercely, and darkening as he loses his own. ULF is engrossed in the game, but KNUT's eyes are more constantly on ULF's face than on the board.]

ULF

[Moving a knight.]

Check.

KNUT

Is it? How? From whom?

ULF

Sire, from this knight.

You should have taken him on your last move.

[ULF is studying the board in excitement and delight, unaware that KNUT is watching him keenly. There is a long pause.]

ULF

Your move, sire.

KNUT

There's my king.

ULF

And my queen follows.

KNUT

Ah!

[Without deliberation, and with a contemptuous ejaculation he takes ULF's knight with his own.]

Well then, now your knight.

ULF

[Rapidly taking KNUT's knight with his queen.]

Check from my queen!

[39]

KNUT

Give me my knight again. Set back the piece.
I will not have it so. I'll play it again.

ULF

[*Losing all control and kicking over the board.*]
Let it stay there for me. I'll play no more.
[*He strides furiously to the door of the inner rooms.*]

KNUT

Yes. Run away, then, Ulf the Coward.

ULF

[*Turning.*]

King!

Yourself had run further by Helge strand
Had I but left you by yourself to battle.
You did not call me Ulf the Coward then,
Arrived full sail to help you, while the Swedes
Were beating you like a dog.
[*So he strides out of the room. KNUT sits very still
and cold, watching him out.*]

KNUT

Ay, So! March on!

Ivar!—With queen and knight to checkmate king!
I should have taken it on my last move!
Sveyn never should have let his daughter go
[*IVAR comes before him.*]

To this Jarl Ulf. Well, did you watch the game?

IVAR

King—there was no checkmate.

[40]

KNUT

You are right, Ivar.

The game is not concluded. To your place.

You'll get no sleep tonight, my leopard. Watch.

[IVAR lets himself out through the house-door: as he opens it a glimpse is caught of moonlight on a line of rigid spear-heads and helmets. KNUT also goes up, and the spears are silently lowered in salute. Then IVAR vanishes, swinging the door behind him.

KNUT returns to the table in deep thought.]

Be it in my own heart—the deep resolve,

The unrelenting action, and thereafter

Judgment: and no man's hand to sway my course

With popular wisdom and a low regard,

And ancient readings of an altered sky.

[He stirs GYLLE with his foot.]

Are you asleep, boy? Wake, Gylle, awake!

[GYLLE stretches himself and leaps to his feet.]

I am for bed now. Wake me at dawn, and be

Yourself dressed then and girded.

[GYLLE sees the scattered chessmen.]

Yes. Tomorrow

I'll show you a move I missed tonight. We'll play

This game afresh, Jarl Ulf, Astrid, and I.

[They go out into the guest-chamber.]

[CURTAIN]

SCENE II.

The same, after sunrise. SVEYN is alone. He is dressed in scarlet and gold, with a fillet of gold in his hair and a golden cross embroidered on his tunic, for it is Michaelmas day. He is trying KNUT's helmet on his head. It nearly extinguishes him: ASTRID enters and finds him so.

ASTRID

My small boy, put it off.

SVEYN

Look at me, mother.

ASTRID

I can scarce see you, funny little boy.

Put it away.

[SVEYN lays it on the table.]

SVEYN

When shall I have one, mother,
Of my own?

ASTRID

Not yet for years.

SVEYN

With a gold band
Like this around it?

[He rubs his forefinger on the crown.]

ASTRID

Nay, God guard you, no.

SVEYN

Why, if my uncle has just such a band,
May I not too?

ASTRID

That is a king's crown, Sveyn,
Which only may a king's son carry. You
Must wear great golden eagle wings, like those
Your father wears.

SVEYN

But Ivar laughed at them.

ASTRID

You must not heed the stranger. He knows naught
Of us.

SVEYN

He said my father could not fly
Unto the sun with these. Why do you frown?
Ivar was kind to me.

ASTRID

You must not speak—
You must not see him again. Ask me not why.
These things you yet shall learn of, but not now.

SVEYN

But I have heard my father say himself
That I am sprung of a true line of kings,
And Gorm of Denmark was my ancestor,
And Sveyn of the Fork-Beard my grandfather.
So I will have a crown like this, not wings.

ASTRID

When did you hear your father say it, boy?
You did not hear aright? Tell me!

SVEYN

Oh, yes.

Ho! Ho! My father came to my bed last night
And thought I was asleep: for there he said
That I was royal in bearing and in blood.

ASTRID

Hush—No—. No—Sveyn, my darling, do not think it.
You are the son of a king's daughter only
And must subject yourself to the king's son.

SVEYN

I am Ulf's son, and yours.

ASTRID

And then he stayed
How long with you?—till dawn?—

SVEYN

Oh, no!

ASTRID

And did you
Answer him?

SVEYN

Nay, not I. He would have said
"Go to sleep, boy," if he had found me awake.
So I lay very quiet with my eyes shut
To hear if he spoke more.

ASTRID

What *should* he say
But "goodnight" to you, baby?

SVEYN

It might be

He should have promised me a horse to ride
This morning, or a sail in a swift ship.
Then, if I heard, I could have held him to it.

ASTRID

Think, Sveyn, and tell me! Did he say no more?

SVEYN

No more.

ASTRID

I am glad.

SVEYN

Yes—"He is an envious thief,"
He said, "of honors won by better men."

ASTRID

Who is a thief—?

SVEYN

He spoke no name. I know.

ASTRID

You are a babe.

SVEYN

My uncle Knut.

ASTRID

No, no!

You must forget all that you heard last night.
It was a dream, Sveyn: this you did not hear
But dreamt and woke upon.

SVEYN

I do not like

My uncle Knut with his old magpie beard.

My father's taller by a head than he.

[ULF enters silently from without and embraces

ASTRID, who starts.]

ASTRID

Ah, God!

ULF

Astrid!

[SVEYN returns to his playing with the helmet, which takes the mischievous form of trying to loosen the rivets of the crown with his little finger-nails.]

ASTRID

Where lay you all last night,

Husband?

ULF

We rose so late from play that I

Came not to you lest I should spoil your rest.

ASTRID

Why came you not to *your* rest?

ULF

Oh, my queen,

At midnight were you waking? Heard you aught?

ASTRID

I know not if awake I was and heard

Sooth, or asleep, and in a dream was ware

Of the North-East wailing through trees.

[46]

ULF

You say

As in a dream?

ASTRID

And it might be anon

The rattle of dry branches: which is strange

For the trees yet are thick with leaves—gold—red.

ULF

You looked not from your window? No?

ASTRID

I closed

Mine eyes, husband, and prayed to hear your step.

ULF

Last night his spearmen stood around the house

In a double row, like spirits under the moon.

I passed amidst them, thinking that almost

My breath should scatter them.

ASTRID

What do you fear?

ULF

[*Laughing.*]

Nothing. Look where the field was strown last night.

SVEYN

Oh! I have hurt my finger!

ASTRID

Do you fear

Nothing?

ULF

You will but break your nails in vain

Upon the crown, Sveyn.

ASTRID
I beseech you—fear!

ULF
[To SVEYN.]

Leave it, and pick up these.

[SVEYN sits on the floor and begins a new game, with the chessmen, setting them against each other by color.]

ASTRID
What mood is this
The king my brother wears? Ulf, I have kept
Silence upon a rack of questions. Now
I can no longer. What offence of yours
Has overlaid our kinsman's face with cloud?

ULF
Why, no offence but to have yielded him
A gift no sovran bounty can afford
At will. His crown, his freedom, and his life
I snatched again from Olaf's closing grasp
And gave him. For on Lymfjord while he lay
Unguarded, Olaf let the rivers down
That in their mountain-sources he had dammed:
Then, joined with Omund, followed at the heel
Of the consuming flood. Thereon came I
And dragged Knut out of his disaster. This
He'll not forgive me soon. But it may be
That in his old age he shall warm his hands
By the fire and say—"This spark I owe to Ulf."

ASTRID
Ah—waste not words! What else befell last night?
[48]

ULF

He pricked me past endurance. I have not
Assumed such service as he'd force me to;
And like a horse I kicked over the trace.

[*He laughs.*]

ASTRID

Oh, rash, rash lord!

ULF

Had I not borne enough?

ASTRID

I am not chiding. But why have you spoken
Your anger out in hearing of the boy?
Why, if you cared for my rest, did you wake
Our son last night from his.

ULF

I waked him not.

Sveyn—why, what have you there?

SVEYN

Two armies, father.

These white are our men, and the red the king's.
They will not fight because 'tis Michael's Mass
But cannot join, being red and white you see.

ULF

Our men are the king's men too. Forget not that.
Come hither.

[*To ASTRID.*]

He shall testify of me
That I am innocent of seditious speech
Before him. Now, Sveyn. Have I said in wrath
One word before you since I have come home?

[49]

SVEYN

Nothing in wrath.

ULF

You hear him?

SVEYN

But last night
You called my uncle Knut an envious thief.

ULF

What?—well! You should go earlier to your bed.
If you keep men's hours you must hear men's speech.
You are too wakeful. Now forget it all.

ASTRID

How can you teach forgetfulness?

ULF

Then be
Silent, my son. Your father is not false
To any man: nor will be to himself.
Go to your game again.

[SVEYN *returns to the floor.*]

I will not bear
More than a free man may and yet be free.
I beat him at the chess.

ASTRID

Oh, Ulf, my Ulf!
What have you staked upon the checker-board?

[50]

ULF

Nothing. I proved myself his better still.

ASTRID

If you be so why have you not dissembled
Your strength?

ULF

Why should I hide the very tree
From which he gathers fruit? While he is true
My strength is his. Let him rejoice in it.
Let him believe my actions, which have still
Proclaimed the heart within me.

ASTRID

You are yet

A babe, Ulf.

ULF

Nay. I am the master here.
This English king of Denmark—or this Dane
Who dwells in England—is our guest, 'fore whom
I'll not dissemble. Here he will not dare
To lay a hand on me.

ASTRID

If you have listened
To that fear, I may something soothe my own.
I dread your rashness more than his intent.

ULF

I know not that to fear it.

[51]

ASTRID

Ah! You speak
Lightly. You cannot laugh yourself to health
Nor make yourself by scorn of him secure,
Ulf. He's the son of Sveyn of the Forkbeard
Who died far distant in a conquered land:
He is the son of Sigrid the proud Queen
That burned her royal lovers in one house.
He is hasty, but of conquering blood; he is not
Weak. Will you take no warning? Can you not
Subdue your heart this once to harbor fear
As a good watchdog over your interest?

ULF

I cannot change my life. To the uttermost
I have lived it out in truth and open dealing
With all men. If we meet as enemies
Let victory befall the stronger.

ASTRID

Which—?

Nay—do not knit your brows!—Which is the stronger?

[ULF *laughs confidently.*]

Ah, God! I hate your laughter. It hath crept
Unto your bosom like a lover, to play
The traitor to you.

ULF

Wear no mourning looks
This bright St. Michael's morn. I am your lord,
And living yet. You shall not need to mourn.

[*A bell begins to ring.*]

Sveyn!

SVEYN
[*Leaping up.*]

Is it time?

ULF
Come now to church with me.
After, we will attend the king at breakfast.

SVEYN
Wear your sword, father.

ULF
Ay, of the spirit, Sveyn:
That is right armour for the day.

SVEYN
I trust
The shiny sort more.

ASTRID
Come back quickly to me.
I am afraid.

ULF
Run you before me, Sveyn.
[SVEYN *runs out.*]
You are my brave wife. When the ships have stayed
By winter bound or contrary winds, you still
Have borne a stout heart under fear: and now
I go these paces to the Church you—

ASTRID
Ulf!
Comfort me not with kindness. I must bear
What is the forfeit of my high estate—
Ulf's wife. If aught there be to fear for you,
Forget not that I am no tender dream

That a boy wastes his leisure with, but wife,
And mother of a son that is the heir
Of honor, high estate, and perilous power.

ULF

Well, then, last night, since none prevented me
I gathered by the shore a galley's crew
And had a ship run out and tackle set.
And in the stall a saddled horse is ready:
So on a threat from yonder guest, I flee
To Norway in a breath, and give my sword
To Olaf, who will prize it. Let me go.
Or Sveyn will knock at Heaven-gate before me.

[*The bell stops.*]

ASTRID

Since you have taken order I return
To my entreaties and my woman's fears.
Come back, and bring our son again to me.
Is he not bonny, Ulf?

ULF

Fit to be king.

ASTRID

No, no: but he's well grown.

ULF

He is as fair
As his fair mother, loyal and frank and brave.
If he but have his father's limbs—the rest
I'd have yours only.

[*He kisses her and goes out. With a sigh* ASTRID
turns from the door and begins to gather up the

chessmen. GYLLE enters from the king's chamber, but hesitates, seeing her.]

ASTRID

Is your master awake?

GYLLE

The king is stirring now.

ASTRID

This night I fear

Has been but a short season for repose.

Was his sleep sound?

GYLLE

The king slept well.

[He turns to go out.]

ASTRID

But now

Where go you? Hath my brother sent for me?

GYLLE

Madam, not yet. I am sent to seek the Jarl,
Your husband.

ASTRID

Say the Jarl has gone but now—

GYLLE

Whither?—That I may hasten after him.

ASTRID

Is it so urgent?

GYLLE

I was sent to bid him

Hasten.

ASTRID

What instant need of haste?

GYLLE

Ah, madam—

The king commanded: I can say no more.

ASTRID

So soon as he returns I will acquaint him
With the King's pleasure. But by this he has reached
St. Luke's Church.

GYLLE

Is he in church?

[KNUT enters, dressed in a linen tunic of pure white,
with a silver cross on the breast.]

KNUT

Well, is it done,

Gylle?

GYLLE

Sire!

KNUT

Well, what tidings?

GYLLE

Sire, the Jarl

Is gone to Church.

ASTRID

St. Luke's, my brother.

KNUT

What,

The loved Physician? Sister, how do you fare?
Well, boy, why do you tarry?

GYLLE
[*Whispering.*]
Sire—in church?

KNUT
Did I not bid you find him? and being found
Why do you now delay to bring him hither?

GYLLE
In Church, sire!

KNUT
[*To ASTRID who has collected the chessmen.*]
Here last night was fought and lost
A bloodless battle, sister. Well, boy, well!
Send Ivar to me then!

[GYLLE *goes out by the main door.*]
Why do you start?

ASTRID
I do not like the Norseman.

KNUT
Why?

ASTRID
If only
Because he hath been ever our enemy.

KNUT
If you deserve no enemy you have
No cause to fear one. If you have deserved
You make him as liable to fears as you.

ASTRID
His slander of my husband darkens yet
Your thought of us, my brother.

KNUT

Is my thought

Dark of you?

ASTRID

Have you not in every word
Sought for a knife concealed?

KNUT

[*Looking out of the door.*]

'Tis a keen morning.

These days of Autumn whet your appetite.
I am hungry, Astrid, and would break my fast.

ASTRID

They shall prepare for you.

[*As she makes for the door on the right she nearly runs into IVAR THE WHITE who enters from without. She starts back, then passes by him and out of the hall.*]

KNUT

[*Who has seated himself by the hearth-table, speaking without a movement or sign of acknowledgment.*]

'Tis a sharp air.

How long till winter by your reckoning now?

IVAR

The leaves are yellow and red upon the tree.
The fallen leaf is not yet withered up.

KNUT

You have been through the woods then?

IVAR

Ay, since dawn

I have slept an hour beneath the beeches, king.

KNUT

I would not bid you count the forest leaves :
But one leaf hangs too many from the boughs,
Which I would have you strip and drop to the Earth.

IVAR

He shall lie there this day.

KNUT

It is the feast
Of Michael. You shall find him worshipping
At Luke's Church. He has grown too high of heart,
He is too tall by a head. Go. Physic him.
You know the path.

IVAR

I shall well find it, king.

KNUT

[*Passionately.*]

Kill him before he rise from off his knees.

I would not have him stand on his feet again
With God's peace in his heart.

[IVAR goes. KNUT rearranges the pieces on the board
as they stood at the taking of his knight.]

His queen was there!

[ASTRID re-enters with three maids, who carry dishes
into the guest-chamber.]

Astrid, why will you go? Remain with me.
Come closer; here by me. What, will you kneel?
Then lay your arms so in my hands, and look
More lovingly. I would not have you make
Too base submission, sister. Why, you are grown
Wondrously beautiful, my sister Astrid.

I never till this hour observed your wide
Imperious forehead, fit for a king's crown.

ASTRID

Am I so altered in a night?

KNUT

Last night

I would have said, "She is no tall woman,
My sister!" But today you seem to me
Above the rank of women, from the eyes up.

ASTRID

Are ten years sped since last we spake together?

KNUT

Will you not kiss me?

ASTRID

Your hands were ever cool.

KNUT

Your face is hot.

ASTRID

And what great deeds since then
They tell of you, my brother! You have made
Sveyn's work in England whole.

KNUT

And your son Sveyn
Is grown almost to manhood.

ASTRID

Knut, my brother.

KNUT

Oh, glad king's daughter, what a kingly son

Should this have been had you but matched with a king!
Was there in all the North no king for you
When Sveyn our father dowered you for a bride?
Astrid!

ASTRID

I am no queen at heart, I think,
But only mistress in this house: the wife
Of Ulf and mother of his noble child.

KNUT

If I should show you wide dominions now
And bid the proudest king of Europe lay
His crown and sovranty before your feet!
Yes, this I'll do,—if it might make divorce
Between the seed of Gorm and—

ASTRID

Brother of mine,
We are your subjects, loyal and whole of heart,
Both my brave lord, my son, and I myself.

KNUT

Well. I am held by many cares away
From this my true dominion: I desire
From southward seas to the eternal ice
Peace, that the fruits of many wars may grow
Ripe: and between *us* peace, before all other,
Since we have been too long estranged.

ASTRID

Yes, Knut.

I too desire this peace.

KNUT

It shall be made.

[61]

I'll find a pledge that shall ensure it here
When I am gone.

ASTRID

And then in England rest
Shall be with you, your sovrantry assured
On Danish coasts.

KNUT

Assured in Ulf?

ASTRID

In him.

There's none in all the North of so great heart
And loving loyalty to your line. And then
Our son shall grow in reverence and strength
• Of whole subjection to your sovran son,
When we are old or dead. So Denmark still
Shall be with England ardently conjoined
By bonds of blood and true allegiance sworn,
Which the wide sea between them shall not wash,
Nor sundered interest blow like wind away.

KNUT

Why, simple Astrid, this is but a dream.
Are you so young yet?

ASTRID

You shall teach me more.

KNUT

Have you no knowledge of the need of kings
That you speak lightly thus of power conferred?
Not in this manner can we keep in sway
By brotherly embraces and soft words
And recollection of a mother's kiss
Turbulent spirits. Whom should a king trust?

ASTRID

Those of his blood: those proved in battle and storm
His servants.

KNUT

I will trust no soul on earth.
I must be lonely in mine eminence
Above all others. I must not reveal
My heart to any, but with a masked face
And hidden motive issue my command.
Therefore shall none question a king, but make
Obedience swift: so is a throne maintained.

ASTRID

Leaning on loyal hearts.

KNUT

[*Rising and breaking from her.*]

No, by our God!

On none but on myself alone, in face
Of enmity and hatred, and the courts
Of private conscience that in each man's heart
Sit in a sterile judgment on the acts
Of kings. And in this craft of sovrantry
Shall prosper none but he that's bred of kings,
Kings and the sons of kings, and draws his blood
From royal sources. Those soaring eagle-names:
Gorm—Harald—Sveyn, that beat with mighty wings
Against the winds of time and shall not droop—

[*She rises.*]

Of these if he be not descended, none
Shall use the title or dispense the power
Of king in Denmark—or on land or sea
Where I have planted foot or set a sail.

ASTRID

There's none here seeks to rob you—

KNUT

[*Interrupting.*]

I'll show you now

The game we played last night—how the Jarl Ulf
Took my knight from me. Thus—

ASTRID

[*Seating herself on the opposite side of the table.*]

I cannot tell

How the game's lost or won. Nor should I know
Why you move such a piece.

KNUT

Do you confess

You have no skill to follow my intent?
You can not warn or praise me in this play?

ASTRID

No.

KNUT

See, I take this knight. Is it no more
Than slaughter in your eyes?

ASTRID

I see not else

Why you have taken it.

KNUT

Now your own lips
Forbid the daughters of old kings to breed
Kings, save they be themselves in marriage matched
With kings.

ASTRID

Then show me. I will quickly learn.

KNUT

You have not skill, nor that authority
To judge the actions of a man. Still more
Might you misjudge the motives of a king.

ASTRID

I say that I shall learn.

[IVAR returns with a red sword in his hand. ASTRID sees him over KNUT'S shoulder. KNUT reads from her face what has happened: he looks on the board and speaks as if musing deeply on the game.]

KNUT

Is it done, Ivar?

IVAR

King, it is finished. On the bay there rides
A galley ready set to slip her cable.
What order now, king?

[KNUT makes no sign. IVAR wheels and goes out.]

ASTRID

What—is finished, sire?

KNUT

He should have given me my knight again.

ASTRID

Sire, what is finished?

KNUT

Is there anything
Irrevocable but the breath of man?

[65]

ASTRID
[*Rising.*]

Knut, tell me—brother! The red sword has done
Justice on some offender, but hath severed
No bond we spoke of! Nay, I fear not that.
You are my brother and this day have taken
My face between your hands and kissed my mouth?

KNUT
All that was mortal now put out of mind—
My love, and all remembrances between us,
And listen to a king, daughter of Sveyn.
A thistle springing under an oak's shade
May linger till some ass snatch off its head.
But if another oak spring there, because
There is not soil nor light nor air for two
The careful gardener cuts the weaker off.
For life must take in power at every breath,
And, as we breathe continually, without pause
Make every hour a well wherein to dip
And draw up water of vitality.
So this great vein of kingship that's in me,
This royal life, demandeth sustenance
And careful tending. Think you that for tears
And womanish fears, or for my own remorse,
I will forego the nurture of this life?
[*The maids come out of the guest-chamber followed
by GYLLE bearing a cup. The maids go out to the
right.*]

GYLLE
Will you break fast, sire?
KNUT
I shall come anon.

[GYLLE returns to the guest-room.]

Now in these Autumn days the leaves fall off
To fertilize the Earth for the new spring.
So must life go to quicken and renew
Life. And my gardener Ivar hath this day
Uprooted from my soil your husband Ulf.

[*She has foreseen it and remains immovable.*]

Daughter of Sveyn, doth not the blood of Gorm
Leap in your heart with joy that you should learn
How a king's life must be refreshed and fed?
Now I will go to breakfast.

[*He goes.*]

ASTRID

Presently

I shall remember.

[*She thinks in agony.*]

Horse and galley! Sveyn!

[*Swiftly she gathers up ULF's sword and shield, then goes out of doors and passes to the right. In an instant she has returned with the saddled horse, which she hooks by the bridle to the bolt-staple of the door. Then she looks down the road.*]

No one in sight—no one in sight—no one—

[*She breaks off, seeing SVEYN, and returns to the table, taking up the sword and belt. SVEYN rushes in, breathless, speechless. She holds out the belt to gird on him.*]

Quickly, Sveyn.

SVEYN

Father!

ASTRID

Oh, son!

SVEYN

Father, father!

ASTRID

Hush. Let me gird you.

SVEYN

Oh, my father!

ASTRID

[*Sternly.*]

Sveyn!

Sveyn!

SVEYN

It slid in between his shoulders—he
Fell on his face, and the blade stood up straight.
Shaking—oh, mother, mother.

[*He buries his face in her bosom, sobbing without
tears. IVAR appears in the doorway unnoticed with
his long bow in his hand.*]

ASTRID

[*Holding SVEYN off and almost shaking him.*]

You are a man.

Sveyn, you are made a man by a man's death.
Take a man's sword and listen.

[*She buckles it on him.*]

Can you hear?

SVEYN

Yes.

ASTRID

You must ride now to the shore. A ship
Will take you on this wind to Sweden. Go,

[IVAR strings his bow.]

And bide with Onund till I come to you.
Have you heard all?

[*She rises to her feet. IVAR slips out of sight to the
right of the house, drawing an arrow from his quiver
as he goes.*]

SVEYN

I must remain with you.

ASTRID

You shall obey me, Sveyn. Get hence. No word!
I am safe, being his sister—or, if not,
You cannot in this peril help me, boy.
You must be saved, because to you all lives
Must henceforth be devoted.

SVEYN

[*Trying the sword.*]

It is too long—

I cannot draw it.

ASTRID

[*Stripping away the scabbard.*]

Wear it naked then,
And when you need it cut the strings with the edge,
And never put it into sheath again.
Now mount. I will not kiss you till we meet
In Sweden.

[*As she takes him to the door KNUT enters with his napkin in his hand and watches her.*]

Ride, Sveyn, ride!

[*She strikes the horse with the sword-sheath and it gallops away.*]

He is safe—he is safe!

KNUT

Is Sveyn for Norway or for Sweden bound?

[*IVAR appears with an arrow drawn to the head.*]

IVAR

For hell, king!—I can hit him yet.

ASTRID

Shoot—shoot!

I will stake all to stablsh him—or lose!

KNUT

Stay your hand, Ivar! Who hath bidden you kill?

I have already gathered up the strand

Of my strong-woven life that was let drop

In this house, and I have already drunk

The stream of my wide being. Let him go.

[*IVAR sullenly departs.*]

Have you no thanks that I have spared his life?

ASTRID

No. You have nothing spared: but his own life

That's in him to be lived—the life of Ulf

And me that we have given him—over that

You had not power. You have let fall a thread—

You have damm'd up one tributary stream

[70]

That shall break down its banks and flood you out.
For he shall yet be crowned and sit, a king,
In Denmark here—no son of yours, but he,
My Sveyn,—living his own life,—bringing naught
To yours, while English earth consumes your bones.

KNUT

Cherish your dreams, my sister. Night shall be
Less solitary and the days less slow
If through the grievous truth you pass in dreams
Clad, for perpetual triumph. Here is mine,
A stouter witness to the strength in me.
[*They bring in the body of JARL ULF and lay him on
the hearth-table, then withdraw.*]

Do I seem taller by a head? In sooth
I am stronger by this strength I have consumed.

ASTRID

[*Turning on him from the body.*]
To this dead man you owe the life in you.
He might have left you under Swedish whips
Still howling!

KNUT

Nay, for there is that in me
Compelled him to deliver me. His life
Had else no purpose. Now it is fulfilled.

ASTRID

He might have killed you in your sleep last night,
And you have murdered him upon his knees.

KNUT

He should not have relented, but to take
My strength he should have killed me. I could not

Spare him. I have mixed no passion in my will
But envy and anger purged from my resolve,
By midnight thought and gentle morning sleep,
Before I swept to it.

ASTRID

But within my soul
They live the more to impel my mind with passion
To move to ultimate account with you.
Be not too passionless lest you leave naught
But withered stocks for sons. For he lives yet,
This man whom you have murdered, perfected
He lives that was imperfect, in his son.
For I henceforth in hatred and suspicion
Will breed the boy that hath his father's fault
Of honesty and faith and gentleness.
For I have that of Sigrid and of Sveyn
Which you inherit: and so much more of you
I have learnt to teach him.

KNUT

[Wiping ULF's bloody mouth with his napkin.]

He will bleed no more.
The fount is dry. The stream can flow not long.

ASTRID

[As he turns to go back to breakfast.]

The stream is flowing for ever and evermore.

[He makes no reply, but disappears. Then she, with fierce sobs and dry eyes, bares her breasts and lays the desecrated head upon them, kissing the defiled mouth.]

CURTAIN

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 015 926 795 7